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SUBJECT: TURKISH ISLAMIC ORDERS, THOUGH BANNED, MAINTAIN INFLUENCE

Classified by DCM Nancy McEldowney, reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶11. (C/NF) Summary: Turkey is home to many brands of Islam. In addition to the official Sunni overlay and the many Alevis (heterodox Muslims), many Turks, including social and political leaders, continue to associate with Islamic orders known as "tarikats" and "cemaats." These have been officially banned for decades as threats to the secular state, but few focus on this. According to a scholar specializing in Turkish Islam, the organization founded by Islamic philosopher Fethullah Gulen has now emerged as the most influential of these Islamic groups through its embrace of globalization and technology. End Summary.

Islamic Orders Thrive Despite Ban

¶12. (U) On the surface, the vast majority of Turks form a monolithic bloc of Sunni Muslims. In reality, however, Turkish Muslims are divided into a complex array of groups, which wield varying degrees of influence. Among these are Islamic organizations known as "tarikats" and "cemaats," to which many Turks belong. These organizations have been officially banned since the mid-1920s as potential threats to the secular order. However, as tarikats and cemaats maintain a low profile, they are tolerated, to the point where many prominent political and social figures are known to associate with them.

¶13. (C/NF) We discussed tarikats and cemaats with Tayfun Atay, an Ankara University anthropology professor who is an expert on Islam in Anatolia. Tarikats, he explained, are mystical Sufi organizations that date back to the 11th century. They have very strict rules and principles. The largest tarikat in Turkey is the Naksibendi tarikat. The Naksibendis have had a profound influence in Turkey. Atay said PM Erdogan, among many others, has been influenced by the Naksibendi philosophy, though he is not a member. Other contacts, however, maintain that Erdogan is a Naksibendi member.

¶14. (U) Cemaats are a more recent phenomenon, emerging in the 19th century. Cemaats place far less emphasis on ceremony than tarikats, and lack the sheikh-disciple relationship that is central to tarikats. Said-I Nursi was a Naksibendi who

broke away from the group and founded the Nur community, the first cemaat. Nursi believed that tarikats had outlived their usefulness, and sought to save Islam by creating a new kind of organization. He emphasized education, and wrote a book called "Risale-I Nur," which is considered a guide by his followers.

Gulenists Are Most Influential Group

¶15. (C/NF) According to Atay, the Gulenist cemaat, founded by Islamic philosopher Fetullah Gulen, has now eclipsed the Naksibendis as the most influential religious order in Turkey. Gulen was a Nurcu who, in the mid-1980s, broke away to form his own movement. Gulenists operate schools and media outlets around the world. They are noted for their keen interest in Western science and technology -- Gulen schools emphasize the hard sciences. According to Atay, Gulenists have embraced globalization and technology, allowing them to appeal to young people, while the Naksibendis have resisted change, and have become weaker and more passive.

¶16. (C/NF) The Gulenist organization is believed by many Turks to control the Turkish National Police (TNP). Faruk Demir, a national security analyst with ties to Islamist and secular circles, told us that while perhaps only 20 percent of TNP officers are members of the Gulenist organization, the TNP leadership is dominated by Gulenists. Nihat Ali Ozcan, a retired military officer and counterterrorism analyst, told us in a separate conversation that it is impossible to estimate the percentage of Gulenists within the TNP, but

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agreed that Gulenists control the organization.

¶17. (C/NF) Atay does not believe there is a direct link between the Gulenists and the ruling Islam-oriented Justice and Development Party (AKP). Some AKP members are Gulenists, including some MPs. The two organizations share certain views, and most Gulenists voted for AKP. But AKP does not have an organized Gulenist wing and none of the senior leaders in AKP hails from the Gulenist camp. The Gulenists, per Atay, have a long-term goal of using their schools to prepare followers to attain high positions in Turkey's leading institutions; AKP's goals are more immediate and more focused on electoral politics.

A More Self-Confident Muslim Generation

¶18. (C/NF) Atay said PM Erdogan has been influenced by modernization and economic liberalization in Turkey. This has caused him to diverge from his Islamist roots as a spiritual follower of the Naksibendi movement and a political follower of Islamist leader Necmettin Erbakan, whose brief tenure as PM ended with the 1997 "post modern coup." Demir made a similar point to us when he asserted that Erdogan holds conflicting Islamist, traditional conservative, and liberal/reformist thoughts in his personal outlook. Erbakan drew support from pious, poor rural Turks -- many of whom had migrated to the cities -- who felt threatened by modernization and sought refuge in Islam. However, in the 1980s and 90s, thanks largely to the influence of former PM and President Turgut Ozal, a pious middle and upper class developed. Humble farmers and shopkeepers became entrepreneurs, and even "Anatolian Tigers." These successful, pious Muslims form an important part of Erdogan and AKP's support base, although the overwhelming majority of AKP's voters are not wealthy. Although schooled in the Naksibendi movement, Erdogan is more open to modernization and less suspicious of the West than traditional Naksibendis.

Scholar Says Islamism No Threat to State

¶9. (C/NF) Atay, a Western-oriented Turk who speaks fluent English, is convinced that Turkey's Islamic orders do not pose a threat to the secular (anti-religious) state. On this point he diverges from many of our secular interlocutors, who continue to view Turkish Islamists as a threat. Atay believes Turkish Islamists today have modest goals. In the past, they may have dreamed of turning Turkey into a Sharia state, but now realize it is "too late to really Islamicize Turkey." They have seen how the younger generation in neighboring Iran has turned against the Islamic revolution, and know that today's young Turks do not want to go down that path. All they want, he said, is to remove state restrictions on Islamic practices, such as the official ban on headscarves at universities and among civil servants.

¶10. (C/NF) This sentiment that a Sharia state is impossible in Turkey has been echoed by many of our contacts. Sadi Kunduroglu, a self proclaimed "agnostic" and foreign policy advisor close to AKP, told us that Turks would never accept a Sharia state or military rule. Kunduroglu believes that Turks respect both Islam and the Turkish military, but do not want to be ruled by either, preferring democracy. Sencer Ayata, a professor of sociology at Middle East Technical University, told us he believes Turkey's Islamists made a "quick and universal" break in their rhetoric in the immediate aftermath of the 1997 "post modern coup," during which the military forced out the then-PM Erbakan's pro-Islam Turkish government. Ayata claims that after the coup, many Turkish Islamist leaders stopped touting anti-Americanism and began to endorse democratization, human rights, and other Western concepts. He believes that this change represented an ideological conversion on the part of Turkish Islamists due, in part, to the political realities in Turkey.

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AKP: A Broader Electoral Coalition

¶11. (C/NF) AKP's electoral success reflects these broader modernizing and moderating trends among Turkish Islamists. Earlier Turkish parties with Islamist roots garnered only about 10-20 percent of the vote, because their appeal was largely limited to Turkey's Islamist minority. AKP, however, won 34 percent of the vote by claiming it was a moderate "conservative democratic" party and reaching out to both Islamist-oriented voters and Turkey's larger group of traditionally conservative and pious, but not Islamist, voters. Demir told us that 25 percent of AKP's electoral support comes from Islamist-oriented voters and that the remaining 75 percent comes largely from traditional (non-Islamist) conservative voters. Ibrahim Uslu, an academic and pollster, made a similar argument, telling us that around 60 percent of AKP's supporters were traditional (non-Islamist) conservatives, around 15 percent were Islamist-oriented voters, with the rest mostly swing protest voters upset with corruption in the other parties.

Comment: "Threat" Of Islamism Hotly Debated

¶12. (C/NF) Many of AKP's domestic and foreign critics would dispute the argument that Islamism in Turkey poses no threat to secularism. They argue that the supposed evolution of PM Erdogan and other AKP leaders from Islamists to "conservative democrats" is nothing more than a political ploy. Nevertheless, our contacts' views on Turkey's religious orders provide a rare glimpse into a cryptic aspect of Turkish society that is normally hidden from outside observers: Islam in Turkey is multi-faceted, with those who embrace globalization, technology, and democratic politics

apparently in the forefront.

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